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## **Past, present, future: steampunk as bricolage**

Samida, Stefanie

**Abstract:** What would a mobile phone look like today if it had been produced in 1880? And what would the world look like if Victorian technology had been used to develop products similar to those we find today? Such alternative historical ideas are not only imagined in Steampunk, but are also implemented. Past, present, and future coincide and build a whole world of their own: between retro and science fiction.

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## Past, Present, Future: Steampunk as Bricolage

Vergangenheit, Gegenwart, Zukunft: Steampunk als Bricolage

BY [SAMIDA, STEFANIE](#) ON [NOVEMBER 29, 2018](#) • ( 1 )



*What would a mobile phone look like today if it had been produced in 1880? And what would the world look like if Victorian technology had been used to develop products similar to those we find today? Such alternative historical ideas are not only imagined in Steampunk, but are also implemented. Past, present, and future coincide and build a whole world of their own: between retro and science fiction.*

### Pure Anachronism

Neither history nor the cultural sciences have paid much attention to recent developments known as “steampunk.”[1] Originating in a literary trend of the 1980s, the term was first used in 1987. It denotes a kind of art genre or subculture in which modern and futuristic engineering is paired with the fashion of the Victorian era portrayed in the novels of Jules Verne, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells. Material culture plays a central role: Old design and modern technology are combined to form an unusual symbiosis of temporal non-simultaneity. This procedure results in a clash of stylistic inconsistencies.

## Nostalgic Aestheticization

Steampunk culture is based on the self-performance and nostalgic aestheticization of a bygone era, which did not exist in this form. Here, as well as in living history or reenactment, clothing – as part of material culture – becomes an instrument for entering a “bodily and imaginary dialogue”[2] with the historical period that the actors seek to represent. Retro-futuristic objects are combined with Victorian-looking clothes, for instance, top hats, tails and vests as well as crinolines and corsets. The defining features of steampunk fashion include so-called “goggles,” glasses made out of brass or bronze and usually sitting inoperably on the forehead or hat. While for the “Sixties scene” the original garments have a special appeal, and whereas for reenactors the faithful reproductions are crucial, members of the steampunk movement create something unprecedented, something that derives from the dialectical fusion of past, present, and an imagined future.

## Creative Recycling

Steampunk is characterized by the creative fabrication of new objects from old things or already known things. What, the actors ask themselves, might a coffee machine have looked like in the 19th century? Such alternating imaginations of history become real in steampunk and materialize in concrete, still-functioning objects. For this purpose, flea market objects, semi-finished products, screws, old heating tubes, various materials (wood, brass, leather, velvet), and many other things are assembled creatively to fashion an end product resembling a technical product of the 19th century.[3] A standard coffee machine is thus transformed into an exceptional and exclusive piece. Steampunk, then, is a kind of creative recycling culture which integrates consumables and “marginal things”[4] of everyday life. Modern bulk goods become “animated” unique pieces in retro-optics.

## Authenticity Through DIY

However, steampunk also means “Do it yourself” (DIY), thus making it part of the so-called “Do it yourself culture.” The movement also makes intensive use of technology, especially digital media. Often, technical problems are solved with simple and available resources; the focus lies on discovering creative alternatives and individual solutions. DIY and the “homemade” label guarantee authenticity. This, in turn, as in many other fields of historical culture (*Geschichtskultur*), functions as a means of

distinction. For what is bought is not steampunk, “because it is all about DIY and handicraft,” says Alexander Jahnke, the founder of the “German Steampunk Society.”[5]

## Steampunk – a Field of Public History?

Steampunk, which deals with the future of the past, extends not only the notion of *doing history*, but is also based on the creative fabrication of material culture. In this sense, steampunk is a recycling culture in two respects: First, it can be found in the practical execution of DIY, since steampunks rely both on consumables and on everyday objects. Second, this reuse culture is characterized by anachronistic styles and the attempt to produce simultaneity out of non-simultaneity. This double bricolage leads to a new and hybrid retro-futuristic material culture that experiences both a change and even an increase in meaning. Steampunk therefore is far more than retro fashion: It seeks to playfully link past, present, and future.

As a phenomenon of popular culture, steampunk is part of the growing pluralization of historical images (*Geschichtsbilder*). These images increasingly exist “in synthetic and hybrid connections, also mixtures, overlappings and bricolages,” which appear to us as “multifaceted, ambiguous and thus arbitrary or puzzling.”[6] Precisely these manifold and polysemic imaginations are central to public history, a research field that I consider part of the cultural sciences. Against this background, public history not only asks “what?” but also “how?” The latter is key. Not least because steampunk is nothing fixed, but instead results from attribution processes and dynamic practices.

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### Further Reading

- Dillinger, Johannes. *Uchronie. Ungeschehene Geschichte von der Antike bis zum Steampunk*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2015.
- Neo-Victorian Studies 3 (1) 2010 (Special Issue: *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies*. Eds. Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall).
- Taddeo, Julie Anne und Cynthia J Miller. *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Lanham, 2013.

### Web Resources

- Clockworker. Das Magazin für Steampunk  
Nachrichten: <https://www.clockworker.de/cw/> (last accessed 25 November 2018).
- Steampunk Magazine: <http://www.steampunkmagazine.com/> (last accessed 25 November 2018).

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- [1] On steampunk, see e.g. Alex Jahnke und Marcus Rauchfuß, *Steampunk, kurz & geek* (Beijing et al.: O'Reilly, 2012). Aus wissenschaftlicher Perspektive etwa Johannes Dillinger, *Uchronie. Ungesehene Geschichte von der Antike bis zum Steampunk* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2015); Michael Wetzel, "Die Sichtbarkeit des Maschinenraums: Steampunk als Nostalgie." In *Nostalgie/Nostalgia. Imaginierte Zeit-Räume in globalen Medienkulturen*. Hrsg. Sabine Sielke (Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Peter Lang Edition, 2017), 107–125; see also numerous articles in *Neo-Victorian Studies* unter <http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/> (last accessed 3 November 2018). Many thanks to Vanessa Bühling (Heidelberg) for her proofreading.
- [2] Heike Jenß, "Stil-Uniformierungen in der Sixties-Szene." In *Uniformierungen in Bewegung: Vestimentäre Praktiken zwischen Vereinheitlichung, Kostümierung und Maskerade*. Hrsg. Gabriele Mentges, Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow und Birgit Richard (Münster et al.: Waxmann, 2007), 101–112, hier 104.
- [3] Thilo Schwer, *Produktsprachen: Design zwischen Unikat und Industrieprodukt* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 149.
- [4] Hans Peter Hahn, "Die geringen Dinge des Alltags: Kritische Anmerkungen zu einigen aktuellen Trends der material culture studies." In *Materialisierung von Kultur: Diskurse, Dinge Praktiken*. Hrsg. Karl Braun, Claus-Marco Dieterich und Angela Treiber (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 28–42.
- [5] Elke Schick, "Messing-Highteck-Romantik." *c't Hacks* 2014, Nr. 1, 16–27, hier 22.
- [6] Wolfgang Kaschuba, "„Turns“ und „Tunes“: Zur Historizität ethnologischen Wissens." *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 109, 2013, 1–27, hier 20.
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#### Editorial Responsibility

[Moritz Hoffmann](#) / [Marko Demantowsky](#) (Team Basel)

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## 1 reply »

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**Jansen, Henning**

November 30, 2018 • 09:10

To all our non-German speaking readers we recommend the automatic [DeepL-Translator](#). Just copy and paste.

Eine schöne und hilfreiche Theoretisierung der Steampunk-Szene, die eine Behandlung innerhalb der Public History nahelegt. Sicherlich können noch weitere mögliche Perspektiven auf die Szene interessant sein, so beispielsweise die Darstellung und Einbindung des Steampunks in (digitale) populärkulturelle Medien, wie Pen and Papers und Computerspielen.

Weiterhin ist die von Stefanie Samida angedeutete Zeitwahrnehmung, die Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigkeit oder Bricolage, bemerkenswert: Mir scheint als verwebten sich in der Kunst und Mentalität des Steampunks gleichsam Nostalgie und Utopie. Auf einen ästhetisierten (idealisierten) Punkt der Vergangenheit, namentlich das spät-viktorianische Zeitalter, wird rekurriert, um davon ausgehend einen alternativen (utopischen) Geschichts- und Technikverlauf zu konstruieren. Anschließen ließen sich Überlegungen, warum hier ausgerechnet das viktorianische Zeitalter gewählt wurde. Mir erscheint als Erklärung möglich, dass es sich bei dieser Epoche um eine möglichst "moderne", mit der heutigen Gegenwart vergleichbare Zeit handelt, die aber ohne die Schrecken des 20. Jahrhunderts (Erster und Zweiter Weltkrieg, Holocaust etc.) auskommen kann und somit (unbewusst) als nahezu idealer Ausgangszeitraum verwendet wird.